

Lone Assassins?: A Series Of Arrests May Link The Oklahoma City Bombing Suspects To A Larger Plot

By James Ridgeway

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WASHINGTON-In the Oklahoma City bombing case, the basic question is the same as with the Kennedy assassination, which remains unresolved more than 30 years later: Did the accused criminals, Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols, act alone?

Other questions quickly follow: Was there a John Doe #2 comparable to the phantom figure on the Grassy Knoll? Were McVeigh and Nichols acting entirely of their own volition? Or were they just one set of operatives in a much broader conspiracy, which may even have been responsible for other crimes across the country?

A series of arrests and revelations over the last week has uncovered the outlines of a broader conspiracy that ties together a skein of Midwest bank robberies with a plot to finance the white power movement. So far, any ties between the robberies and the Oklahoma City bombing are speculative, but federal investigations are ongoing.

The key figure in a wider conspiracy is Mark Thomas, 46, of Macungie, Pennsylvania. Thomas, the PA Aryan Nations leader, is also a Christian Identity preacher, member of the underground Posse Comitatus, and a former chaplain of the Ku Klux Klan.

Last Thursday, a federal grand jury in Philadelphia indicted Thomas and four others, charging them with conspiring to commit bank robbery and receiving stolen money between 1994 and mid 1996. According to the indictment, Thomas "recruited young people at his residence . . . including defendants Scott Anthony Stedeford and Kevin William McCarthy, to rob banks and commit other crimes on behalf of the Aryan Republican Army"-the name the Midwestern bank robbers went by. Thomas introduced Stedeford and McCarthy to Richard Lee Guthrie Jr. and Peter Langan, the leaders of the Aryan gang. The indictment covers seven of some 22 bank robberies allegedly carried out by the group since 1994. The heists netted more than \$250,000.

Thomas was accused of providing the group with false identification and illegally modified radio equipment, as well as renting a van used in one robbery, among other charges. According to the indictment, the robbers gave Thomas an unspecified amount of money "to further the goals of the organization [i.e., building a separatist white bastion] and to purchase weapons and other items

necessary for additional bank and armored car robberies." Thomas faces up to 25 years if convicted. "I'm innocent," he said before surrendering last Thursday.

As for the other members of the gang: Authorities say Guthrie committed suicide in his jail cell last July. He had just arranged to testify for the government and was in the midst of negotiating a book deal for which he promised to tell all. His partner, Langan, is currently on trial in Columbus, Ohio, for a bank robbery there. Stedeford was tried and found guilty last year of a March 1995 robbery in Des Moines. And last week McCarthy, 19, who has become a witness for the government, testified in Langan's trial that Thomas had introduced him to the robbers and plotted the thefts.

Thomas is a peripatetic number-two man in the far right movement. Over the years he has crisscrossed the nation, ingratiating himself with Richard Butler, who heads the Aryan Nations in Idaho, and speaking at the funeral of Bob Miles, the white resistance leader who was beaten to death in August 1992. Most recently, through his Web site, Thomas has been promoting the teachings of Louis Beam- probably the most influential figure in the white power operation. Thomas's home outside Allentown has become a permanent squat for skinheads, and he has shuttled his young followers back and forth to Elohim City. According to the indictment, three meetings to organize the bank robberies took place at that Christian Identity enclave in the Ozarks. Thomas made headlines in 1995 when he was linked to two skinheads, David and Bryan Freeman, who murdered their parents. They had been at Thomas's home, but Thomas claimed he did not know them.

The fifth man named in the indictment is Michael William Brescia, 24, a part-time college student at LaSalle University in Philadelphia and the son of a retired firefighter. Brescia lived for a time with Thomas, who then introduced him to Guthrie and Langan. Brescia also resided for a while at Elohim City, where he was reportedly the roommate of Andreas Strassmeir, a former German army officer who has become a mysterious fringe figure in the Oklahoma City case.

McVeigh's phone logs show him making a call to Elohim City shortly before the bombing in an alleged effort to reach Strassmeir. No one knows much about Strassmeir, who is variously reported to be a Berlin neo-Nazi, a German army intelligence officer, and possibly even a U.S. or NATO undercover agent. Now the question is whether Strassmeir was in any way tied up with the robberies.

Brescia also has been named as a defendant in a civil suit brought by victims of the bomb blast against McVeigh. They have likened him to John Doe #2, although the slight Brescia is said to bear scant resemblance to the swarthy suspect on the now discarded wanted posters. Two weeks ago the feds formally disbanded their manhunt for John Doe #2, claiming they know the identity of the man on the poster and that he is not involved in the case.

Guthrie's statements to the government before his death, now buttressed by the testimony of McCarthy, should help bring into focus the larger far-right plot. What's happened is the reestablishment of a white resistance underground, reminiscent of the 1980s Order gang. This renewed insurgency includes both an above-ground political apparatus and an underground that attempts to raise money by robbing banks, armored cars, etc. The stolen money is said to then pay for extending the operations of the underground: buying radio equipment, explosives, and get-away cars; arranging for fake IDs; producing propaganda videos; and so on.

There's another layer to the conspiracy theories swirling around the Oklahoma City case. That is, did the feds have prior knowledge of the bombing through informants or, as some would like to think, by setting up an abortive sting operation? The far right would love to blame the whole thing on the government and, in the ensuing uproar, get rid of the detested Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms.

In addition, the victim claimants in the civil suit would like to include the government as a defendant because it would allow them to make millions of dollars in a settlement.

The McVeigh defense also stands to gain ground by showing prior knowledge, if only to place McVeigh as a mere soldier in the midst of a larger plot.

That is why the sudden emergence of Carol Howe, the daughter of a well-to-do Tulsa businessman, adds to the intrigue of the case. Reliable sources in the case say Howe has given an affidavit to the FBI recounting how she worked as a paid informant for the ATF and infiltrated the far-right movement in Tulsa—accompanying various members on their trips to Elohim City. According to Stephen Jones, McVeigh's lead defense attorney, Howe told her ATF superiors that she heard Strassmeir and Dennis Mahon, the Tulsa Klan leader, discuss blowing up federal buildings on several occasions before the Oklahoma City bombing in April 1995. Howe could not be reached for comment, and her attorney did not return calls. Angela Finley, reportedly Howe's ATF supervisor in Tulsa, said, "I am not allowed to comment on anything about the investigation."

Mahon has never been charged in the Oklahoma City bomb plot. However, he recently testified before a Tulsa federal grand jury investigating yet another white-power bomb plot. In that case, several people reportedly discussed blowing up various federal buildings in 1996. In an interview last Sunday, Mahon said, "This woman has got some shit on me. They're lies. But it's my word against hers. It looks real bad for me right now. My lawyer says I can be arrested." In 1994 a Tulsa court issued a temporary protective order to safeguard Howe after she complained Mahon threatened to "take steps to neutralize me," by breaking her knees if she tried to leave the Aryan movement. The order was later dismissed.

Was McVeigh tied up in these robberies, conceivably as a way to finance the purchase of the ingredients to make the bomb? Jennifer McVeigh reportedly told the FBI that her brother once handed her three \$100 bills, told her they were from a bank robbery, and asked her to launder the money; she put the money in her credit union.

Jones denies McVeigh was engaged in bank robberies. Still, the conspiracy behind the Oklahoma City bombing is beginning to unravel. And as it does, McVeigh and codefendant Nichols are proving to be more than mere freelance murderers acting on their own.

Additional reporting: Erica Macy Talk back! editor@villagevoice.com